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SIR ROHAN'S GHOST.*

GHOSTS are things of the past. What does one, therefore, in a modern book? Especially in a book emanating from the intellectual centre of—New England. Ghosts belong to the Radcliffian era of novel making, and not to the year of grace 1860.

But is Sir Rohan's Ghost a real ghost?

Real enough; terribly, awfully real. Ghosts of the same genus, but of a feeblér texture, keep company with many a man who walks the streets of our own metropolis—lays its icy fingers on the shoulders of white-haired merchants—makes confusion in the figures of cashiers, and errors in the briefs of lawyers—ascends the pulpit, and looking up from the eloquent page, threatens with a voice more terrible than Nathan's, saying, "thou art the man." In every heart which buries an unrepaired or an irreparable crime, there is hidden a similar ghost, which may at any time spring up into as tormenting and vengeful a Nemesis.

Sir Rohan's Ghost is the shadow of a great crime—the memory of a cruel deed—the avenging principle of justice, pursuing the wrongdoer through every phase of life, to life's end: a dark brooding shadow, persistent as his own, even more so, for it came where no light intervened, and where natural shadows could not fall; ever terrible, though in its uncertain, varying form, ranging from the fantastic to the horrible; and worst of all, assuming at times a pleasant and beguiling shape, only to turn to sharper misery at last. Sir Rohan's Ghost is a *very* real thing.

The external thread of circumstances upon which this romance is hung, is one, the separate strands of which might have been woven into a very ordinary novel. There is nothing very wonderful or unheard of in the mere incidents—the author's skill is shown in the *creation of the ghost as a personality*, and in the multiplied phases of its exhibition, as well as in the thoroughly artistic molding of the materials of the story. Enticing from her peasant's home a young girl, whom he takes to his castle in the north of England, and of whom he makes a wifeless lady for a few brief months—after which she *disappears*, Sir Rohan endeavors to escape from the memory of his crime by various devices.

In determined attempts to lay this ghost, Sir Rohan threw himself into the heat of foray and battle. Braver knight there was not in the kingdom; but he left the army, for the shape glided perpetually between his sword and his foe, charged breathless and with glistening eyes beside him, rode with the same glitter as earnestly in retreat, covered him with its oppressive vacancy when he fell, till sense ebbed away with his blood. Then Sir Rohan essayed oratory and statesmanship; but the shape, so distinct that it seemed as if others too must see it, swayed its long arm beside him as he spoke, and sobbed Banshee-like, with a rustling inspiration in his pauses. Sir Rohan

left the bench and bar. Dissipation opened its arms to receive him; midnight drawing-rooms were proud to hold him; gay dances wreathed themselves to his motions; rosy cheeks flushed at his approach. But a pale cheek was beside the rosy one, an airier form glided through the dancers and did not disturb the set; and, with the red wine before him, a long white finger plunged down the glass, and brought up the glittering trophy of a golden ring. Sir Rohan reformed. Yet, perhaps, in the dry recesses of old libraries he might be alone, and so he delved deep among dusty tomes, striving to bury his heart with the dust of ages that he found there; but another hand shifted the leaves as he read, and eyes devoid of speculation met his, as he unconsciously turned for sympathy in the pages. Sir Rohan left literature, etc.

So passes a score of years. But his Nemesis appears in a deadlier shape. Miriam, the ward and adopted daughter of his friend St. Denys comes to visit him; and the ghost-wearied man, weak with his daily, deadly struggle, with endless battles against the phantasy of his life, finds at last a brief, sweet dream of peace, in his love for this fair girl—the halcyon days had come at last to him, the ghost was visible now only at rare intervals. But a few weeks, and Sir Rohan's deserted halls were to be awakened by the unwonted revelries of a marriage feast. But the Ghost was reserving the deadliest blow for his happiest hour, the stunning intelligence was brought home to the proof that Miriam was his own daughter.

A dreadful noise was in his ears. Like a sword the Ghost struck in a blinding blade of light through his eyes. All the blood in his pulses sung across his brain and he fell prostrate at her feet.

"At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down, at her feet he bowed, he fell; where he bowed there he fell down dead." Sir Rohan was dead of his Ghost.

Some of our eastern contemporaries, carried away by the force and power of this book, seem to have had visions themselves; one Boston eulogist remarks that "underneath its outer surface there lies a hidden and profound meaning for him [the reader] to bottom, and the revealed story bears no comparison to that which lies behind the veil. It is, in short, an allegory of art, and represents the transfiguration of painting by the glory of the Pre-Raphael sun-dawn. It is a prophesy as well as a symbolical history of painting. . . . It speaks of a new era of Art, represented by the *cereus*, of which Turner is the high priest."

We do not believe the beautiful description of the flowering *cereus* on pp. 308-9 represents any such thing; and if there was any such deep latent intention in the mind of the writer, it might as well not have been there, for it is certainly buried too far below the surface to be perceived by any ordinary ken. We attribute no such far-fetched symbolism to the author, whose real purpose appears to be twofold: first, to exhibit in its intensest and most dramatic form the power of conscience, on a mind which has discovered no heavenly

* SIR ROHAN'S GHOST. A Romance. Published by J. E. Tilton & Co., Boston, Mass.

balsam for sin-stains ; and, secondly, to show the power of art to sooth, though it could not cure a mind diseased. In the course of this medicinal process there arises, however, frequent opportunities for the writer not only to show some technical knowledge of the painter's art, but also to indulge in artistic suggestions not unworthy the attention of amateurs—especially of the Pre-Raphaelite school. The description of the conservatory in chapters 6th and 18th are gorgeous paintings in their way. We will take a paragraph or two.

At one point long alleys lined with splendid shrubs formed in the sun arcades of diamond brightness, while halfway up their height hung narrow galleries, whose vines trailed over balustrades of gilded net-work. Where the crystal wall arched out in crescents, great cones of the dark shining leaves of orange, myrtle and camelia were massed against the fresh brilliancy of tamarinds and enormous ferns, whose intricate meshes glittered like cobwebs in morning dew ; while, again, the rich green of the maranta was thrown into deep shade by the startling light of a mimosa tossing from its rude trunk a spray of airy tremulous foliage and long wreaths of golden blossoms. Opposite these, an Indian coral tree loftily reared itself, clad in profuse scarlet flowers, and by its side the regal poinciana, still breathing of Madagascar and southern wealth, poised its clusters, crimson and magnificent, on large twin leaves all winged and nervous for flight ; while counteracting discord, over them and across, with snake-like coils, the tropical banhinia, clambered and hung its white festoons, elegant, unequal, countless. . . . Just above Mr. Redruth's head, hung in riotous profusion the luxuriant vines of a night-blooming cereus suspending its bursting buds. Already its dark brown sheathing parted ; already the great star within rivalled Hesper in yellow brightness ; already the long snowy petals, sailing calmly back, enhanced its glory, and the multitudinous silky stamens tumbled out in a cataract, on the wind of an untold sweetness ; opening wider every moment, and burdening the whole air with his imperial presence, while by slower culmination others followed in his train.

The characters in this romance are few, but each one is essential to the perfection of the plot. Not a paragraph, hardly a line but helps on the story ; scarcely anything could have been omitted without detriment, and little, indeed, could be added to help the total effect. We do not, however, quite like Miss Miriam ; she has no reverence, and a woman without veneration is destitute of one of the most essential and ennobling attributes of feminine nature. Miriam makes horrid puns, too, on serious subjects, which is ever an unbearable impertinence ; we cannot forgive her for making a jest of "God's acre ;" but aside from this fault, she is just the kind of creature we should expect from her history—a child of mixed parentage ; a peasant mother adopted into a titled family. Nature asserts itself through all the restraints of her social status. "She has learned," said her guardian, "little or nothing from books, nothing of use, yet adapted herself surprisingly to the languages of such countries as we lived in, and by a continual companionship with me, has learned orally what

all the types of Europe would have failed to impart." . . . "She lived in feeling, not thought, in the sensational, emotional ; nothing of the intellectual." Then, again, she cannot help for all her grace and general habits of dignity, from an occasionally impulsive fraternization with the lower [in the domestic scale] orders of womankind, and seizes with delight the rare chance which Sir Rohan's neglected house affords, of taking an impromptu brush with the maids. Conscious of her nameless origin, a less noble nature would have sought to conceal it by a rigid and unswerving observation of proprieties. Miriam will not have it forgotten. Minus the puns, she would have been as perfect a sketch as the coarse villain of the plot, Marc Arundle ; a lawyer with family expectations, and a tireless hunter of the heiress of St. Denys—Miss Miriam.

"You like the bar?" Sir Rohan asked.

"Why, no, not particularly. Though there's something like a zest to ferreting facts, especially when I have such a one as yourself in the witness box."

Sir Rohan was silent, but St. Denys said, "Ah, how's that? I scarcely understand."

"I mean a reticent fellow, who has plenty to say, but don't mean to speak, and behind whom there lies a most excellent case."

"And what case has Sir Rohan?"

"Oh, I referred to his reticence—not to anything else, I assure you. There are few of so blameless a past as his, to endure such a test," he replied, bowing to the one of whom he spoke ; and Sir Rohan bowed in return, though well knowing Marc Arundle never would have said it had he thought it true.

Mr. Arundle resumes. "I fancy a thoroughbred lawyer enjoys himself like a good setter—once on the scent, heaven and earth can't stop him."

And Marc Arundle was on the scent of the origin of Sir Rohan's Ghost. "By turns affable and sarcastic, he (Marc) mingled in the conversation, till obtaining its command, when he conducted it to elicit Sir Rohan's peculiarities, causing him to shrink nervously from the scalpel so suddenly busy about him." Of course Marc is the elucidator of Miriam's nativity.

The chapters respectively entitled, "The Wine Cellar," "Fanchon," "Mr. Redruth surrenders his Accounts," and "The Clang of Hoofs," are equal to any word painting of modern fiction. Mr. Redruth's death reminds us strongly of that of Judge Pyncheon in Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables, and with fewer words suggests all which that elaborate picture portrays. Indeed, it is only with the works of Poe and Hawthorne that Sir Rohan's Ghost ought to be compared—to the latter of which it approximates most nearly ; for though it is not in the power of language to exceed in intensity of effect, certain tales of Edgar Allan Poe's, as for instance, his "Imp of the Perverse," "The Case of M. Valdemar," etc., yet his productions are all comparatively brief ; he gives us episodes of lives, but never a life—all is fragmentary with him. Poe never had patience

enough to write a book; his genius, burning when it was once kindled to a white heat, soon exhausted itself; while, on the contrary, Hawthorne occasionally impresses us with an idea of endless continuity, as in his descriptions of Clifford, while his culminations are not inferior to Poe's. The writer of *Sir Rohan's Ghost* exerts all the artistic combination of Poe, in merging every incident to the grand climax, with much of the power of Hawthorne in analyzing mental idiosyncrasies. We consider *Sir Rohan's Ghost* as an artistic effort second only to any book in American fictitious literature, and that one book is Hawthorne's "*Scarlet Letter*." The romance of *Sir Rohan's Ghost* is marred by a few faults inevitable in any writer who attempts to portray scenes and phases of society of which they have learned only through books—as for instance the *social impossibility* of a young lady in England, in Miss Miriam's position in life, really partaking of a house-cleaning *mêlée* in a gentleman's residence where she was a guest. And, then again, the putting of such an Americanism as "I'm all up a tree" into the mouth of an untravelled Englishman,—but these and such as these are minor faults, in no essential degree affecting the merit of the book.

And, with all the felt power, we need not hesitate to say genius, displayed in this romance, there is yet a certain lack of something, better felt than can be described; it is not an intellectual want, that is everywhere met, and you are satisfied that the author could deal with other themes as easily as she handles indifferently soul-psychology or the working of a mine; but there is in this book no geniality—neither Miriam's wretched puns nor St. Denys' more hearty sunshine, succeed in ameliorating the chilling atmosphere which the Ghost distills from her wings; nor do the rich imaginings of Miriam, while holding the priceless vintage of Tokay in her hands, beguile the reader into even the transitory hope that he has escaped the Ghost in the "Wine Cellar"—we know the Ghost will come in some shape, and we cannot enjoy ourselves even there. Perhaps the author meant we should never forget the Ghost any more than Sir Rohan could. If so, the purpose was more successful than healthful. Besides the lack of geniality there is an absence of all religious aspiration, and but slight suggestion of even a high morality. We do not, of course, want a sermon insinuated into a novel, but in a book of over three hundred pages—dealing, too, with a soul diseased,—we do not see hardly how the opportunity could have been altogether missed of indicating that there are better resources for sin-stained souls than the heat of battle-fields, the pursuit of pleasure, the delights of literature, or even the fascinations of art. Herein we find the "*Scarlet Letter*" the superior of "*Sir Rohan's Ghost*;" that torture "disciplined" one at least "to truth," but the sufferings of Sir Rohan effect nothing but his death, and incidentally some advance in his art. In the "*Scarlet Letter*" we

feel that there is but equal-handed justice in the torments of Arthur Dimmisdale—for was not his victim suffering year by year, day by day, hour by hour a torture which would have been equal to his, if the open can ever compare with the concealed? But for Sir Rohan, his betrayed was years ago sleeping the quiet sleep, while he, shaken forever over the hell of his own fears, seemed destined to suffer capital punishment without end or scarcely respite. We are glad to have known Sir Rohan's Ghost, as we should have liked to have looked once through the seven deepening circles of the Inferno, but we could no more make a friend of the book, despite its splendid passages, than we could take to our hearts the recent tenant of a charnel house. We are glad to know that there is a writer just standing on the threshold of authorship* possessing the power of creation, the grasp of thought, the compass of imagination sufficient to fill out the full measure of such a life as Sir Rohan's; we prize it for its artistic suggestions, its exquisite botanizing, for its landscapes, its sea views and its wonders under the earth, for the flavor of its sparkling wines and the precious odor of its fragrant plants—but not for the companionship of the commonplace St. Denys, the imperfect Miriam, the somewhat too poetical steward, the rascal Arundle, or—the Ghost. We are glad to have read this book—it is worth any one's reading—but we do not want another like it. We would rather see the talent of such a writer expended on characters whom it would be a pleasure for us to cherish as friends, or at least among whom we might select a friend—some one to whom we could go for strength and inspiration, and whose company would be a perpetual moral tonic, and whom we should always like to have about us—we do not want another *Ghost*.

E. V. S.

SEPARATION.

LINES SUGGESTED BY A DRAWING BY O. T. BARRY.†

"THE morning light! it shines on me
As never morning shone before.
What tender, beckoning looks I see,
While open swings the pearly door!
Sister, that dear, glad angel's smile
Is like a smile we used to know.
You cannot come?—a little while,
The door stands open—let me go!"

"She sees the heavenly dawn behind
The cloud that drops dull rain on me.
My sunbeam flies its source to find:—
Yet ah! my heart has need of thee!
I cannot lift my eyes, nor smile,
Though thee from hence I would not keep.
I know 'tis but a little while—
A little while:—yet I must weep."

LUCY LARCOM.

* The author of *Sir Rohan's Ghost* is a young lady—Miss Harriet Prescott, of Newburyport, Mass.

† Incorrectly printed in our last number, and, therefore, republished.